

Jane by Piggles

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Summary:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

1. Jane

Author's Note:

direction? never heard of it. proof reading? not even literate.

Jane Hopper had a reputation at her school. It's not something she had cultivated herself, or tried to influence. No, reputations just be like that sometimes. The will of the school determines what kind of person you are. We're all scrutinized in the eye of public perception. We have no control over the podium that people put us atop. We're all just subjects in the world's portrait, and the world will move us around if it has to.

I guess what I'm trying to say is, Jane Hopper had a reputation, but she didn't want to. She didn't want to be the cool, popular, frigid ice queen that everyone made her out to be. But when you're on the cheer leading squad for a school with the best performing team in the state, you learn to suck it up. Plus, there are pros to being that kind of person in high school. Who needs a car when your friends all own Caddys and Bentleys.

But that wasn't Jane. Plain Jane was a sweet, sensitive girl who just so happened to like acrobatics. Do what you're good at, right? Well Jane was a damn good gymnast, and she wasn't going to let some dumb insecurities get in the way of what she loved.

Regardless, it was hard. Her friends were all cheer leaders. The only people she knew outside her own social circle was the football team, and they weren't exactly good company. All Jane wanted was a taste of something different. She attended one of the biggest schools in the state, so it only served to reason that Jane should be branching out, creating connections, making new friends. So many people in one concentrated area, and Jane knew about 10 of their names, not including her own.

It was a Tuesday when she got her chance to expand that list.

Will Byers wasn't anyone particularly special in their school. He was

quiet, reserved, probably in a *Beatles* cover band, and didn't really talk to anyone outside his circle, which was par for the course in this place.

But he, like everyone, had a reputation. Will the Wise.

That was what Jane was thinking of when she approached him. Tuesday afternoon, lunch period, football field. Will was sitting alone on the bleachers overlooking the field, finishing up some homework before AV, and Jane was watching him. She didn't know much about him outside insignificant rumors and she was going to change that.

When the cheer squad took a break, Jane spent her time on the bleachers. She'd ran up them so fast that Will didn't have a chance to notice her until she was right beside him.

"I'm Jane."

"Will," he choked out quickly.

"Homework?"

Will glanced at his textbook-covered lap. A blank paper with the words "Sociology assignment" was covering one side of the open textbook.

"Trying. Kravitz has a very special way of explaining assignments and I'm just, you know, trying to figure it out."

"Howard Kravtiz, right? I had him for chemistry once. Couldn't stand his voice, always put me to sleep."

The joke evoked a smile; Jane wanted more.

"I swear he told us the same joke ten times over the course of a month. You must've heard it, the one about his son's wedding and he's getting a suit made—"

"And the tailor," Will continued animatedly, "is an old guy, and he says something like 'Us old guys need extra space for the arms' and —"

“And Kravitz was so offended! Old guys? He was livid. He's not an old guy, his son is only getting married!”

Will couldn't finish the story for her because he was laughing too hard. Jane stopped short of the ending to listen. It wasn't the same kind of laughter she was used to. When she and her friends gossiped about people like that, it was always a vicious rite. The goal wasn't to laugh, the goal was to demean. Will was just laughing. It was funny, and they were both laughing together.

“I didn't know we had chemistry together,” Will finally said when he had stopped laughing. The textbook on his lap was closed.

“I didn't speak up too much. I guess we both didn't.”

Will nodded. “Easier to fly under the radar, right? Why bother other people if they're just going to bother you.” He added an afterthought shortly after: “I guess that's pretty hard for you, though. Flying under the radar and everything, since you're, you know, *you*.”

The comment startled Jane. She couldn't tell why, though.

“It looks like your break is almost over,” Will said shortly after. Jane, in her endless stupor, hadn't taken notice of the squad formation on the field. They were all prepping for the next maneuver.

“Yeah, shit, looks like I gotta go. But, we should, like, talk. Or hang out, or something. You're pretty cool, Will.”

“You're not so bad yourself, Jane.”

Jane was halfway down the bleachers when Will said it. She stopped dead in her tracks, turned to Will, and said, “My friends call me El.” Then with a charming smile and a small wave, she was gone. The squad welcomed her back with open arms and more than a few suspicious stares.

Mike Wheeler was tired. *Dead* tired. He felt like he could drop face

first into the grass and fall asleep, right then and there. In fact the grass itself did look very comforting. It was so lush and green, and it looked so soft, like a pillow. His feet felt light while walking on it, and he imagined himself floating away on a cloud, into the sky and then into space, where the strength of the vacuum would tear him apart.

Sweet release.

But if you were to ask Mike why he's so tired, he'd never answer you. *Hey Mike, why you so tired?* Fuck you, that's why. It's just not something he talks about. His downtime is *his* downtime, so stop asking so many nosy questions.

He's just tired, okay?

That's why the only place he can think to go for lunch is outside. Lucas was probably at the grocery store with Max buying their lunches. Dustin was probably on the toilet catching up on the newest editions of *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Which meant Will was probably doing homework on the bleachers, drooling over all the football players instead of actually working. Will was the only person Mike could talk to at the moment, precisely because he knew Will wouldn't talk at all.

The tired brunette laid himself out on the seat behind his best friend like a graceful sloth. The bleachers were hard and cold, but Mike found his eyes slowly drooping closed regardless. Will had reopened his textbook by now, though his eyes never left the football field.

"What do you think of Jane Hopper?" he asked suddenly. Mike hadn't been expecting any noise during his nap. He groaned but sat up to answer anyway.

"What does it matter? She's preppy and popular, what more do you need to know?"

"I think you're painting her with a broad brush."

Mike scoffed. "Because *their* brushes are so much smaller."

"She talked to me earlier. Jane, I mean. She was actually really nice."

“What're you straight now?”

When Will didn't immediately respond, Mike took a step down the bleachers to sit next to him. “Sorry,” he said, following his friend's gaze to the field.

“It's okay,” Will said. They were both looking to the field now.

“So which one is Jane Hopper?” Mike asked, more to fill the silence than to actually learn.

Will pointed at one of the cheer leaders. “That's her.”

Mike watched her. She practiced her maneuvers with a simple grace. The squad tossed her into the air like it was nothing, like tossing plastic, and she floated down like a bag in the wind, landing perfectly in the arms of her friends with a guttural, gleeful laugh. The curly-haired boy watching her wasn't sure what to think.

“Since when do you talk to cheer leaders?” Mike asked, not removing his eyes.

“She talked to me first. Maybe she was just bored? I hear I'm good company.”

“Careful, Ringo, we don't need that head of yours getting any bigger.”

“If anyone needs to temper their ego, it's Dustin. I like to think I've found the fine-line between pride and confidence.”

“I didn't think those two were opposites.”

“Maybe pride wasn't the best choice of words. But what can I say? Jane Austen is finally getting to me.”

They were reading *Pride and Prejudice* in class. None of the boys in the party had taken to it at first, but with a little coaxing from Max, they all became avid fans. All but Dustin. His convictions were surprisingly strong. Despite that, their AV meetings usually devolved into unproductive spats about the book. All the boys had their own opinions, and they all had to be right. Darcy is the wrong suitor, and Jane is the better sister—that kind of stuff.

"But she's no Jane," Mike noted offhand.

"And you're no Darcy."

"He ends up with Elizabeth, not Jane."

Will thought about this for a moment.

"I'm not trying to draw parallels, Mike. I'm just saying, before you pass judgment, maybe you should take a look inside yourself."

"I think *you're* reading too much into this. Cheer leaders talk to losers like us all the time. So what if Jane Hopper decided to grace you with her company this one time? Still doesn't make up for the rest of them being bitches."

"Hey now," Will said; he didn't like insulting other people, especially not so harshly as the rest of the party. He was nice in a way the rest of them couldn't be. "If one bad apple spoils the bunch, why can't this apple...unspoil the bunch?"

"What are you talking about?"

He shrugged. "I'm just talking, Mike. Isn't it the writer's job to find meaning in the seemingly meaningless?"

Mike wrung his hands nervously; Will knew *damn* well he didn't like to talk about it.

"Anyway," Will proceeded, "I just wanted to ask. About her."

Mike leered at the *her* in question. The practice was over and everyone was slowly dispersing. Jane Hopper was laughing at something one of her friends said. Even from across the field, at the top of the bleachers, Mike could hear her laugh.

Jane was waiting for the school day to end. Her short chat with Will had been a fun break, but now she had nothing to look forward to.

Cheer practice was over, English Lit wasn't until Monday, and Will couldn't be found anywhere after lunch. The rest of the cheer squad was skipping class, spending the rest of their day at the mall. Jane happened to have a free period after lunch, and decided the mall just wasn't for her.

So what to do?

The library was always Jane's go-to. The librarian, Flo, was a sweet woman. She always had a good recommendation that never failed to meet Jane's exceptionally low standards; it's hard to not love books, you know? And Jane loved books. *God* did she love them. They were like crack cocaine and plain Jane's veins always needed a refresher.

Provocative, but accurate.

That week saw the library closed for renovations. Exciting; and frustrating. It meant Jane had virtually no where to go to read in peace. The school, despite its massive size, offered very little in the way of refuge from the noise.

So Jane searched. She became a conquistador on her way to El Dorado—the mythical city of complete silence. Anywhere, really, that she could just be with herself and her book.

Pride and Prejudice was the meat on the menu today. It was the assigned reading from English Lit, and Jane couldn't be happier. For one: *Jane Austen*. A lucky coincidence that the real Jane never let go over her head. And two, it's just a damn good book, and she loved damn good books.

But you can't read damn good books without some peace and fucking *quiet*.

Back in the day, conquistadors and explorers were pretty popular. Which is a parallel that Jane was oblivious to while she stalked the halls. Classmates and students from every grade stopped her to say Hi or waved to her from down the hall. While our brave explorer searched for a haven, she ironically found her efforts having the opposite effect. The halls were becoming more crowded. People were being too friendly. She needed to get out of there.

Jane spotted the closest door that she knew would be unlocked: “AV ROOM”. She didn't know what time it was, but for the love of god it *had* to be empty. There was a group of aspiring ballet dancers eyeing her from the down the hall and if she didn't act quickly they'd never let her go.

Without a second thought, Jane hurried her feet and practically dove for the door handle.

Mike loved his friends. He really did. But sometimes they were bitches, you know?

Like, for example, when they leave him to clean up all the AV equipment after a meeting. Or when they leave him to clean up the D&D campaign crap. Will helps sometimes in that case, but when it comes to AV, they're all bitches and Mike wants them to know it.

Ur a bitch he texted Will while he cleaned up. The equipment wasn't that heavy and there was a surplus of space to store everything. Still, it was the principle that mattered.

His phone buzzed not long after. *It helps to build character*

Mike reserved his laughter for later. For now he was just annoyed. And tired. So tired. And they all knew it, too, and they still made him clean up.

That's the kinda shit that people lose friends over.

Mike wasn't paying attention when the doorknob started turning. Assuming his friends had finally decided to pay their friendship dues, he just kept working.

“If you guys came back to help, you're too late. But if you came to apologize then I might—” he turned and stopped. It wasn't his friends. It was Jane Hopper, and she was closing the door behind her. And locking it. And looking at him with a look. A looky look. The kind of look that looks...looky.

Mike cleared his throat. *Get your head out of the gutter!*

"I—um—you—the door?" were his introductory words. Smooth like molasses.

"Oh," Jane said, taking a step away from the door, "Sorry, yeah, I was just looking for a place to read. I can go, though, if you're—"

"No, no, no, I was just cleaning up. We had AV club, like, ten minutes ago. I'll just be another minute." Mike reluctantly tore his gaze away from the intruder to finish his clean-up in a timely fashion.

"Oh no, it's fine, really," she said, sitting down at the one table in the room. The only thing she had with her was a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. It reminded Mike of his conversation with Will. He really wished it hadn't.

"You're in English Lit with Mr. Bosson, right?"

Jane asked the question. Which was something Mike clued in on after a few seconds. A few long, silent seconds. Molasses.

"Oh! Oh yeah I am. I didn't know you were, too?"

"It's funny, your friend Will said the same thing earlier. Am I really that quiet?"

"I—I'm not sure. Will always says I have the worst perception skills he's ever seen."

She chuckled. "Your friend really lives up to his nickname."

Will doesn't know how to play the drums. What is she talking about?

"Oh you meant Will the Wise. Yeah he's a total whiz. We just need him to get a hair cut and then he'll be perfect."

That one earned him a full laugh. An airy, light laugh that poured from her mouth like a gentle river. Mike stopped what he was doing to listen. He had finished packing everything up shortly after she came in; he was just moving equipment back and forth at this point.

"You're, uh, you're reading Jane Austen. That's kinda funny."

The real Jane quirked an eyebrow. "Why is that funny?"

The real Mike didn't know what to say. His real mouth was open but no real words were coming out. Strange noises prevailed instead, and Mike silently cursed all the English teachers that told him their classes were eventually going to be useful.

Words! What are words?

Jane, for her part, waited patiently for his answer. She smiled pleasantly and sat with her legs crossed, looking like the image of perfection before the bumbling AV president. It really wasn't helping Mike's concentration.

"It's just, you know, your name is Jane, Jane Austen's name is...well, yeah, it's, yeah. And the character is named Jane. So it's like, I don't know, a really crazy coincidence, right?"

Jane nodded along with the information. It wasn't the first time someone pointed it out, far from it. But she hadn't told him her name, and she was pretty sure it was their first time meeting. And yeah, a lot of people in the school knew her name (more than she'd prefer) but she didn't think *he* knew her name. It wasn't important or anything, she just didn't think he would know it. Is that crazy?

"It's a good book," Mike said. He'd abandoned the equipment and decided to just sit down. Even sitting, Jane noted, he looked as tall as a mountain.

"Do you read a lot?" she asked.

Mike rolled the question over in his head. He was in a conundrum; should he dive in head first to what will probably be a lengthy conversation that will definitely make him late for class, or should he plead the 5th and then run to chemistry with minutes to spare? So many choices. So, so many.

"Yeah I guess I read," he said, unsure of which path he was taking. "You know, everyone reads eventually, right?"

...what?

Mike died inside. He could see it in the eyes of the girl sitting across from him that he'd just uttered the dumbest sentence in the human language. She was going to stand up, pretend she had somewhere to be, and then run. Or maybe she'll back flip out of the room. Or, like, climb through the vents. Acrobats are crazy, dude.

She laughed instead. It wasn't a bad laugh, quite the opposite, actually. It was sweet and casual and most of all, *so cute*. Not that Mike would ever say that out loud, especially after all the other dumb shit he'd already said.

"You're right," she said, still snickering, "everyone *does* read eventually. But what do *you* read?"

Mike froze for the first few seconds. Personal questions were always touchy with strangers, especially strangers like...well, strangers like her.

Thankfully his brain picked up quickly. His eyes had spent the interim time scanning the table, and immediately landed on the only book in the room.

"I read *Pride and Prejudice* for, you know, for English Lit."

"Oh?" Jane smirked. "What did you think?"

"Well, you know, I haven't finished it yet; only Max has finished it so far. I like it and all, I like the characters—except Elizabeth, she seems kind of haughty. But I guess she's supposed to settle down with Darcy in the end and, like, chill out, I guess?" He laughed a little as he finished.

Mike looked up to glean Jane's reaction. She was smirking—not like before. She was smirking, her eyes were squinting, and she wasn't staring directly at him like she was before. Jane was staring at the table, deep in thought, preparing her next words carefully.

"What did you call Elizabeth?"

"I—" Mike coughed, "—Haughty."

She wasn't squinting anymore. Her eyes were wide and

indeterminate, and staring right at him. With a suspiciously warm smile on her face, she said, "It was nice talking to you, Mike. Hopefully I see you around."

And before Mike had a chance to reciprocate, she was up and out the unlocked door in a flash of blue and gold. The former of the school's official colors felt very fitting to the poor boy. He wasn't sure what the hell had just happened, but he knew whatever it was, it was bad.

Need to talk. After school was the last thing he texted Will before packing up shop and sprinting to chemistry.

2. Elizabeth

Notes for the Chapter:

same, peggy

Elizabeth

Mike was having a bad day, and Will could tell. The text he'd received just after the lunch block was pretty grim on its own, but actually seeing Mike was the final nail in the coffin. The boy was antsy, shaken, and above all, ghoulish. He looked, to Will, like he'd not slept for days at a time. He looked like gravity was working overtime wherever he went, like he was Atlas holding the sky on his shoulders, and Will wanted nothing more than to take his place, if only to give his friend a short break.

"Mike," he said when they reached their bicycles, "you look like hell."

The ghoul grunted in response.

"I'm sure whatever this new development is, it can wait. You've been running yourself ragged this entire week and it only just started."

Mike knelt down to unchain his bike. "Have I ever told you that you sound like my mother?"

"Yes," Will said, kneeling down beside him, "everyone has. You, Lucas, Dustin, Max, Jonathan, *my* mother. And you know what, I don't mind it, because Mothers are the universal symbol of sober thought."

Mike thought back to his own mother. Then he thought about Will's mother. And when he was sufficiently confused, Mike saw Will shrug at the impending question.

"Universal is a strong word, but you know what I mean. If I have to be the responsible mother that you and the guys never had, so be it."

"I think Dustin's mom is pretty responsible."

"I think you're avoiding the same conversation you asked for."

Mike had gotten the lock undone. Now he was just holding it in his hands, letting Will's accusation settle. He really was the sober thinker that they all needed.

"Why did you ask me about Jane Hopper?"

Will looked up from his own bike lock, which was still securely attached. "I told you, because she talked to me. First time, I'm pretty sure."

"Yeah, me too."

"Oh?" Will chirped, trying his best to sound surprised.

Mike, unconvinced and a little irritated that his friend may or may not know something that he doesn't, continued: "Yeah, she caught me while I was packing up for AV. I don't really remember what we talked about, but she asked me about Elizabeth at some point."

"Elizabeth?"

Mike grabbed his copy of *Pride and Prejudice* from his backpack and waved it in Will's face.

"Oh, that Elizabeth."

"Yeah, that Elizabeth. Actually, you know what, before I say anything else, you have to tell me what you think about Elizabeth."

Confused but unfazed, Will meditated on his answer. It concerned Mike to see his friend in such deep thought, because Mike himself hadn't spent even half as long thinking of his answer. Would that have changed things? If he had just waited, taken a second, and thought about what he was going to say before saying it, would he have said anything different? The hindsight was killing Mike, and the waiting only made it worse.

"I think," Will eventually started, "she's very misunderstood. And I

think you have to go beyond the first few pages to see that.”

Mike turned his book over in his hand; the bookmark stuck out barely beyond chapter three. The groan that followed could only be described as “angrily faint”.

“Shut up, Byers. That's completely besides the point.”

“*Beside* the point.”

“She got angry over nothing,” Mike said simply. After a few tenuous, silent seconds, he continued tentatively, “I've never even met her before. How was I supposed to know it was a touchy subject? It's not even a touchy subject, she just asked me about a book. Who gets so worked up over a book?”

“Apparently she does,” Will the Smart Ass replied. It was a new nickname his friends were trying out. Mike felt it very fitting in this particular encounter.

“Well, then...whatever. I'll probably never talk to her again and that'll be that.”

Will snorted. “That'll be that? Mike, you two go to the same school. You're in the same classes. What is your plan here?” He was still working on his bike lock as he spoke. The key had been lost some time ago by his brother, and rather than buy a new one, the two siblings kept a homemade lock-pick kit handy. It was incredibly inconvenient and stupidly unconventional, but Mike would be lying if he didn't think it was super fucking cool that his best friend could pick a bike lock.

“Are we gonna be here all day? I might as well just take off without you.”

“You do that, Mike, and then you can talk to yourself for the entire 15 minute bike ride home. And once you're done figuring that plan out, you can work on the other one, right?”

The lock clicked and fell undone.

“I don't know why this is such a big deal. She's just some cheer leader

who likes a book way too much.”

“Well you're the one who wanted to talk about her, so, I just assumed you had something to say. About her. Or the book. They both got you pretty flustered—flustered if I've ever seen it. So when you're ready to talk, I'm on your right.”

The two of them mounted their bikes and set off. It was a beautiful sunny day and they were glowing in the sun. The wind picked up their hair and their clothes and spun it all like a dryer. For Will it was actually an improvement.

When they reached the suburbs they were talking again.

“I have a feeling class discussions are going to be a lot more lively,” Mike said somberly.

“English Lit isn't until Monday. You have a whole week to either map out an argument for your point, or just apologize and take the lump.”

“Apologize? For what! I called a fictional character haughty and she, she what? Leaves? That doesn't seem a little crazy to you?”

Before Will had a chance to reply, his phone buzzed. Normally he'd never interrupt his friend for something so frivolous, but he'd been waiting on a particular message from his brother. What he found instead was much more useful.

Max wasn't in chemistry. She wasn't at the bike rack. She wasn't with Lucas. She wasn't even in the parking lot doing sick kicks, dude. No, Max was in the study hall catching up on some reading. Shocking? I beg your pardon. I'll have you know that Maxine Mayfield reads exactly one (1) book a year, which is more than anyone (except Mike) in their party can say. And maybe Will. Also Dustin reads comics, and you could make the argument, so technically he's out too. Really the only people that don't read are her and Lucas. God they're so good together

we should get married

So anyway Max was in study hall. Don't ask her why and don't ask her how, but Lucas was gone. He'd taken off with Dustin for some joint project that required 100% focus and attention, which meant No Cooties allowed. It's not like Max wanted to help them with their stupid project anyway, it sounded dumb when they explained it.

Max was fine, anyway. The room was pretty much empty since most other people were in class or skipping. The supervisor was off somewhere doing something. The large windows that adorned the walls were like waterfalls of sunlight, and Max could feel her skin singing praise. Really she couldn't ask for a more tranquil, peaceful, quiet,

“Hi there.”

Who t h e f u c k

“Sorry, am I bothering you? I probably am, but I just noticed the book you're reading and I—we're in the same class so I thought, I don't know, maybe you'd want to talk about it?”

Max looked up. Standing before her was a cheer leader, blue and gold and perfect in every way. Short, curly hair; button nose; pressed clothing; the perfect amount of lipstick that Max could never seem to emulate. She didn't have a name tag or anything so the ginger was kind of in the dark on that front, but Max was anything if not resourceful.

Before she used those resources, however, she spared a glance at the book in her hands. It was tattered, worn, obviously well-used. By far it was the only book Max ever read in her free time, and it made her gag knowing it was a school-assigned book. Regardless, she loved it, and she loved talking about it.

The skater gestured lazily to the empty chair across the table from her. The cheer leader thanked her softly and took up a seat.

“Actually,” the aspiring acrobat said as soon as she sat down, “I think I've deceived you.”

Max's face revealed nothing. "Go on."

"I really do love that book and I would love to discuss it with you sometime, but I actually wanted to talk about your friends."

Blank as a block. "Okay..."

"I talked to a few of them earlier. Mike and Will. I—" she stopped abruptly. Her mouth shut sharply and her eyes eluded notice. Max knew immediately.

"What did he say?"

"Hm?" Her eyes shot up. "Who? Will? Nothing, no, he was just—"

"Mike. What did Mike say?"

"Well we didn't speak for very long, I think—"

"Jane!"

"Okay so he insulted my favorite character and I—I—I freaked out, okay? I just know he's your friend and I think I made a mistake, so, I think I want to apologize?" It started and ended very quickly.

Max closed her book. Never in a million years did she think something like this would fall into her lap in *study hall* of all places. She was definitely coming back more often, and she was definitely bringing Lucas. No one stirred up shit quite like they did.

"Listen... Jane was it?"

"You already said my—"

"Great, Jane it is. So listen Jane—"

"My friends call me El."

"Don't interrupt me, Jane. Anyway..." Max leaned in. "Do you really think you *should* apologize?"

The girl sitting opposite her looked confused. What kind of mess was she getting herself into?

“Mike is your friend, right?”

“Oh sure!” Max cried; “Sure, yeah, totally, whatever. But he's not a girl. We're girls, and we need to stick together, right?”

Jane opened her mouth to answer but found little time to do so.

“In any case,” Max persisted, “I have to hang out with those fuckers all the time. Imagine being stuck with 4 of the dumbest, grossest, most useless boys you've ever seen in your entire life all the time. Imagine, Jane. Imagine.”

She was imagining. Although the accuracy of her imagination relied heavily on Max's anecdotal accuracy, which Jane was beginning to doubt, she still managed to paint herself a clear picture of agony.

“Aren't you dating—”

“Oh don't even get me started on Lucas. I love him, I really do, to death and back again, but sometimes, he's a bit much. You need room to breathe, you know. You need to shake things up every now and then. I mean look at you, walking up and talking to me, clearly in need of a shake up.”

“No I just wanted to ask—”

“Hey it's cool, we all need a change of scenery sometimes. And you picked the right scene, too. I've been waiting for another girl to come along and break up the monotony. My boobs just started coming in, too, so we can go bra shopping! I've been waiting for another couple to go on shopping dates with.”

“But I'm not dating anyone?”

Max's eyes nearly popped out of her head. “Right! Obviously, duh!” *Slow down, Mayfield.* “But, you know, when you do, then we'll have plenty of opportunities, right.”

“Right,” Jane affirmed meekly, mind whirling.

The ensuing silence cut into Max like a knife. She could hear the white noise around them getting louder.

She wasn't entirely sure of her plan; she wasn't entirely sure she even had a plan. What she did know was that she had an opportunity. And if she wanted to be a good friend, she wasn't going to squander it.

"What did Mike say, by the way? Like, what did he actually say?" She eventually asked. A sigh of relief whispered between them.

"He said he thought Elizabeth was...haughty."

"Haughty?" Max scoffed at the word. So very fitting for Mike. Always quick to judge, never quick to read.

"Yeah, right? So it's not just me," Jane said, smiling, utterly relieved that her reaction hadn't been unmerited.

Max leaned back in her chair. "Mike is just...well, he's Mike. That's a problem in its own right. He has this view of the world that he can't seem to let go of. It's hard to explain, but, if you knew him you'd understand. I'm actually pretty surprised he called Elizabeth haughty; I think they're pretty similar in a lot of ways."

Max seemed to meditate on her own explanation. As much fun she liked to poke at her friends, she was always careful with actually criticizing them. All five of them dealt with enough shit on their own. Infighting was the last thing their party needed.

"Hey," she said, a new thought suddenly coming to her, "Why *do* your friends call you El?"

Mike was speechless. Well, not entirely speechless. He had some choice words to say, but for now, they sat in his stomach and awaited marching orders. They grumbled in there, screaming to be let out. It took everything inside him to keep his mouth shut and his words where they were.

"So," Lucas said, breaking the silence that hung over the four friends like a thick fog; "What do you think?"

Will looked ready to say something, but he, like Mike, was holding it in. He knew his best friend would speak up eventually, and he didn't

want to be the first one to say anything.

“Why?” was Mike's first question.

“Because we know how to do Halloween right,” was Dustin's answer. He was grinning his big toothless grin, and Mike hated how infectious it was. While Will was definitely the mediator of their group, Dustin was the only person who could really put an argument to rest—with that dumb, sappy grin of his.

Will spoke up not long after. “How much did it cost?”

Dustin and Lucas glanced quickly at each other. The former's smile had all but vanished.

“We don't need to go into the specifics, but it was cheap, okay? The real cost was fixing her up. The car itself we just found in the junkyard, and since then Dustin and I have been collecting parts from all over the city.”

“So this is what you two have been up to?” Mike asked, a hint of accusation in his tone. His eyes were transfixed on the car before him. He could taste the drool pooling in his mouth; his body always betrayed him.

“Yeah it's kept us pretty busy,” Lucas admitted, “and Max hasn't been too happy about me being gone all the time. But when she sees what it's all amounted to, there's no way she can be mad.”

Lucas' friends all laughed in his face before he even finished the last sentence.

“You—you think Max isn't going to be upset that you've been wasting your time fixing a car from a movie that's she never even seen before?” Mike asked, genuinely curious if one of his best friend's was actually that stupid.

Which he was. Lucas returned their stares with a half-confused/half-scared expression. He was pretty sure he knew his girlfriend well enough. This isn't something she'd freak out over...right?

He turned his attention to the car itself. The Ecto-1. Familiar fans

would recognize the name immediately, and die-hard fans like him and Dustin would recognize a 1959 Cadillac Miller-Meteor if and when they saw one—which they did. Just sitting there in the junkyard, anyone's for the taking. And as fate would have it, the two *Ghostbuster's* nerds stumbled upon it almost by chance. They'd actually gone to the junkyard to look for scrap for a different project, but instead, they discovered the greatest piece of 80's memorabilia that two teenagers could ask for.

"She'll love it," he eventually said, trying more to convince himself than his friends. "She will. I know she will."

"Yeah not to mention," Dustin said, "this is perfect timing. Some might call it provenance—"

"Providence," Will corrected.

"*Providence*, thank you, Ringo. It's providence. Halloween is a week away, and we still have no idea what we're doing. So?" Dustin shouted the last word while gesturing manically to the car.

"So, what?" Mike said. "You want us to show up to the Halloween dance in this? What, dressed as the Ghostbusters?"

"Well, Mike, you didn't have to spell it out like such a dick, but yeah, essentially that's what's happening," Lucas retorted with a renewed confidence. Even if Max was going to think it was a stupid idea, he sure as shit was not going to let Mike tear it down.

Mike's history of shitting all over good ideas goes way back in Lucas' mind. Ever since they were little kids, it had been Dustin and Lucas coming up with dumb ideas, and Mike shutting them down. And yeah, they were always dumb ideas, but you kind of expect your friends to support you in dumb endeavors, right? Because that wasn't Mike. If Will was the sober second opinion of the group, then Mike was the drunken third opinion that no one asked for.

Sometimes his comments could be helpful. Like when Dustin and Lucas considered running jointly for the position of President on the Student Body, it was Mike who reminded them that with such a job came innumerable responsibilities, which would cut into AV, D&D,

movie outings, hang outs, and anything else that the party did together.

But that was only sometimes.

Lucas closed the garage door as they all stepped out. "One of these days, Mike, you're gonna have to stop caring what other people think and just do stupid shit."

"You mean like you and Dustin?"

"Exactly. Me and Dustin do stupid shit and have a good time because of it. You sit in your basement on your laptop and wait for the next great American novel to just fall onto the pages. That's the difference between you and me. Action, and inaction."

"I thought Ayn Rand died already. How is she standing here critiquing my life?"

"I don't know who that is, but you know I'm right."

"Okay, guys," Will interjected, "let's leave the philosophical debates for Monday, okay? Plus I think I'm actually stoked about this. It was a lot to take in at first, but I think I'm coming around to it."

"Will—"

"Mike, Lucas is right... Sort of. He's right about one thing: you *do* care too much about what people think of you. Maybe this is the first step towards changing that. Think of how freeing that could be. I'm not asking you to enjoy it, I'm just asking you to try it. To do something."

Mike could feel the October air running down his spine. Summer had bled over into the fall season, leaving plenty of sunlight and heatwaves to go around. But every now and then you could sense the shift coming. You could feel it in the air, in the wind, in the sway of the naked branches that ran up and down the street. Mike watched them sway, back and forth, back and forth.

"Okay," he agreed quietly. "But what about Max? There's only four Ghostbusters."

“Yeah, and their secretary,” Lucas said.

His friends all stared at him. How he managed to be the only one with a girlfriend was beyond all of them.

Mike sat silently in the back of the class like he did everyday. *The Performing Arts*. Quite possibly one of his least favorite classes in the entire school. He and the party only applied as a scheme to boost their GPAs with an easy A, but it wasn't anything like the movie. Instead of a sexy Emma Stone, the four seniors (Max already had a stellar GPA) had to stare at Miss Goodfriend, the crypt keeper of the auditorium, all class. The woman was pushing 80 and still saw no retirement in her future. It was like watching someone slowly self-destruct right before your eyes, and you just want to pull the pin to make it go faster.

That didn't make any sense, *but neither does this dumb fucking class!*

And it only got worse from there; specifically for Mike. Sitting just a few rows ahead of him in the messy gathering of chairs set up on the stage was none other than Jane frickin Hopper. Or El. Or whatever Will and Max liked to call her. He didn't care anyway. He didn't care that they were all on a nickname basis. Who cares about that stuff? Losers. Not Mike.

“Okay class, listen up,” Goodfriend began, gasping a shallow breath; “I have a new project for you.” Another breath. “I’ve been speaking with your English teacher,” breath, “and we’ve decided to intersect our interests.”

Nobody in the room looked entirely thrilled about that. Before today they'd been memorizing Shakespeare and Kyd, which was easy enough if you had a basic grasp of the material. Other than that it was small, obscure plays week to week, nothing that ever challenged the notion of this being a “bird” course. That was about to change.

“For the next month, we will be producing our own stage interpretation of *Pride and Prejudice*.”

Mike's heart sank. This was only getting worse by the day.

"I've already selected roles. They're on this sheet of paper which I will give to you to hand around."

No no no no no no

"This decision is final, please do not come to me with complaints. The selection was random."

Please God if you're there it's me Mike don't do what I think you're about to do

Goodfriend was still talking when she handed the paper to someone in the front row. Mike could hear the sound of her weak voice but couldn't make out the words. The blood running through his ear canals was too loud. His hands were sweaty; he knew what was coming, and all he could do was pray that it didn't.

Too late. He watched Jane Hopper turn in her seat and catch his gaze immediately. That was when he knew for sure—he knew he was fucked.

She stood up with the paper in hand and walked over to him. Her expression was indecipherable, whereas Mike's was becoming more and more panicked the closer she got. In a last ditch fleeting thought, he considered running. Running home and just never coming back. Mike was a coward and he would've happily admitted that to the whole world if it meant Jane Hopper would just *sit down, please!*

She stopped in front of him and handed him the paper without a single word. It took him a few seconds to wrestle his eyes from her stare, but when he did, he almost puked.

Jane Hopper – Elizabeth Bennet

A few lines down:

Michael Wheeler – Fitzwilliam Darcy

"Looks like we're working together, *Mike.*"

Notes for the Chapter:

it is only acceptable to cry when you're listening to
frank ocean

3. Mary

Notes for the Chapter:

critique noted and hopefully implemented

Mike didn't know what to feel.

He knew it was irrational to hate Jane Hopper. He knew that she was a lot sweeter than most people made her out to be. He knew that all of the feelings bubbling inside of him would go away eventually and he would begin thinking rationally again. For now, though, he clenched his fists and gritted his teeth and thought about all the ways Jane Hopper was making his life difficult.

That was an exaggeration, obviously. If anything she was making his life easier by subtly avoiding him. The unspoken tension between the two cast mates was like a heavy stone on his lungs, crushing the air from them every time he saw her. He wanted to say something, he really did. But what could he say? I'm sorry I maybe insulted your favorite character? Now can we stop being weird around each other and just get this play done?

But he couldn't. Mike Wheeler was a coward, after all.

Will took his seat at the lunch table across from Mike. Lucas and Max had decided to join the gang this time around, and while Dustin was there too, he was too enraptured by the world of *X-Men #135* to contribute anything meaningful to the conversation.

"When do you guys wanna start running our lines?" Will asked. They'd just gotten out of *Peforming Arts*, where they had all been given crisp copies of the script. It ran about 80 pages deep, clearly cut down to the basic premise to save on time and money, which no one minded at all.

Will, thankfully, had been given the role of Mr. Bingley, which was great news for Mike. They already had tomorrow pinned down to run through lines together. Lucas had been awarded the role of Mr. Whickham, which Mike would not see the irony in until he actually

finished the book. Dustin had accepted the role of Collins, which he delighted in, professing, "He doesn't 'read books' so you know he's a party animal."

"Dustin, have you actually started the book at all?" Will asked.

"Well, no. But I read the Wiki after seeing my role and I think I got his character down pat. He doesn't read, he likes this lady Catherine a lot, uhhhhh, he's a priest?"

"That actually sounds pretty accurate," Mike verified. His bookmark had moved down several dozen pages.

"And what about you? Done any research yet? Excited to know how this all turns out?" Max finished with a playful smirk. Mike could only glare in response.

"I already know how it *turns out* and I'm not worried. This might actually be my chance to make amends with Jane after..."

He glanced at Will; he hadn't told the others.

"After..." Dustin continued for him, his interest in comics suddenly waning for the moment.

With a heavy sigh and a twitch of his head, Mike laid out the short conversation he'd had with his stage companion. The four friends listened intently while he spoke.

"And, yeah, I don't know," he finished a few minutes later.

Near the end of his story, Max and Will had shared a cursory look with each other, which went unnoticed.

"Here's something you might not have known," Max began, scooting out of Lucas' grip to lean forward and speak with Mike more directly; "It turns out that *Pride and Prejudice* happens to be El Hopper's favorite book ever."

That *was* something Mike hadn't known. And there was something else he didn't know. "Okay I gotta ask, why 'El'?"

At this, Max's face broke out into an even bigger smirk than before. "Okay, so, what do you know about El's history?"

"History?"

"Background, story, upbringing, whatever! What do you know?"

Mike's forehead crinkled in thought. "Nothing really. She moved here, what, like, two years ago? And she joined the cheer team and never really spoke to anyone. Until now, I guess."

Max bobbed her head in thought. "Yeah, pretty much. But I'm talking about way back. Way back to her childhood, which, apparently—" her smirk had been replaced with a frown, "—wasn't so great. I don't know all the details but apparently she came from a pretty shitty home, a foster home, I think. Then one day the Chief of Police from whatever god forsaken countryside town she came from took her out of it and adopted her. And—apparently!—the only thing she had with her was that book. So the Chief nicknamed her after her favorite character, one Elizabeth Bennet, and she's gone by El ever since. None of her friends actually call her Jane."

"Oh shit..."

"Oh yeah! You didn't just insult her favorite character, Mike. I think, to an extent, you may have insulted the girl herself."

Mike's brain was reeling from this new information. The anger he'd felt bubbling in himself before was now being offset with a sense of guilt.

"But," he said, struggling to find his next words, "like, that's still an overreaction, right? I just called her haughty, I didn't call her a bitch or anything."

"I don't know, bud. Maybe there's more to this story that you're just not seeing." With that, Max leaned back into her boyfriend's embrace.

"Maybe you should go and talk to her," Will offered.

"And say what?"

The shorter boy shrugged. "Got me. Maybe start with an apology?"

Mike had to stop himself from scoffing. He had to stop himself and actually think about what Will was saying. Because deep down, he knew there was some truth to it, and he just didn't want to admit it.

"What if I make it worse?"

Will had no response for that.

Lucas, on the other hand, decided to finally offer his input. "Mike, you're a lot of things. A great writer, a great AV president, a bit of a prick, whatever the opposite of go-getter is, definitely a wet blanket —"

"Okay I think I get—"

"Basically useless in any sport, can't even drive, not really a ladies man—"

"Please for the love of God—"

"But you're also a nice guy...most of the time. You just need to learn to accept your mistakes, move past them, and get on with your life."

While Mike mulled this advice over, Dustin was quick to counter his friend's slight hypocrisy. "Didn't you punch Bryce Santiago in the face over that Lionel Richie thing a few weeks ago?"

"Okay no, fuck you, that is a totally different situation, he was being a punk about it, he deserved to get hit."

"But you were wrong?"

"That's not point!" Lucas nearly shouted. "Just because you're right doesn't mean you gotta be such a dick about it. Maybe Bryce should learn some god damn humility!"

Dustin rolled his eyes and went back to his comic. Petty squabbles were Lucas' bread and butter, and this was not the hill that Dustin was prepared to die on.

“Anyway,” Lucas said, shaking off his acute rage, “Just apologize, make up, and get this play over with. Supposed to be an easy A, right? Plus I don't want you distracted before the dance. We're going to fucking *nail* this costume contest, boys.”

Mike murmured his assent. He'd completely forgotten about the whole Ghostbusters thing, and hadn't even known that there was going to be a costume contest at the dance. If it were up to him they'd all be in his basement on October 31st watching the movies that these nerds intended to imitate. His idea of a good time was him and his friends together, alone, doing something they loved. That's how they'd met, after all, and that's how Mike wanted it to be for the rest of his days.

But he knew that wasn't plausible. His friends had grown up, matured, and embraced the social way of life. He was beginning to fear that he hadn't done the same.

Jane heard the end-of-lunch bell ring from the AV room. She'd decided to give it a second chance, since she still had nowhere else to go. What had to be her 100th read through of her favorite book was going well. The room, for obvious purposes, was nearly soundproof. It was easily the quietest room in the whole building, and it was quickly becoming Jane's favorite reading spot.

That is, until she heard the doorknob creak. Before she even had a chance to look up, Mike Wheeler was taking the empty seat across from her. He'd brought his own book with him this time.

“Hey,” he said softly.

“Hey,” she returned.

They stared each other down in the most intense staring contest you've ever seen, no pun intended. It actually gave Mike some time to admire her eyes; they were chocolate brown, the same color as her hair. He kept his eyes open as long as possible just to keep looking at them.

Jane won, though, in the end, forcing Mike to make the first move. “So, um, I just wanted to apologize for yesterday. I didn't, you know, I didn't really know what this book meant to you, and I guess I was being kind of, uh, ignorant to, you know, your feelings...”

Jane blinked slowly. Her mouth was ajar, frozen there by the slight shock she was feeling at that particular moment. Quite literally it felt like a bolt of lightning had struck her where she was sitting. This was not what she was expecting. From what Max had told her earlier, this seemed like the exact opposite of what she was expecting.

She closed her book. “Um, thank you. I should probably apologize, too. I just, I've never heard anyone call Elizabeth 'haughty' before, I guess it just threw me off. So, sorry about leaving so abruptly; I figured, if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all, right?”

“Right,” Mike agreed with a chuckle. Relief washed over him like holy water, cleansing him of all those weird emotions that were bubbling in his gut.

“I thought it was kind of weird, too,” Jane added with a chuckle of her own. “Because if anything Darcy is the haughty one, right? I understand that he changes over time, but still, sometimes I can't believe Elizabeth ends up with him.” She finished with another airy laugh. Picking on the classic protagonist was something she never tired of, which went hand in hand with her love of critical discussion.

Mike was struggling here, though. Unsurprisingly he'd become somewhat attached to his role, especially after getting past the first chapter of their source material and discovering the nuances of the characters he'd been so quick to judge. Sure Darcy was a piece of work, and yeah by the half-way point of the book he's like a new man barely redeemed from his dickish introduction, but that still doesn't mean he's not a good guy.

Not to mention, Mike just likes to argue. “I don't know, I think they're perfect together. Both a little self-righteous and caught up in themselves.” He hadn't committed entirely to his words, but even then, Jane's expression had gone somber. Not as somber as last time, but just enough that Mike kicked himself for being an idiot.

You were this close! If you'd just kept your mouth shut.

“Yeah, I guess I can understand what you're saying,” Jane offered coolly, “but you have to admit Darcy is so much worse. He won't even dance with El—lizabeth, with Elizabeth in the beginning because she's not pretty enough. The worst crime Elizabeth is guilty of is presuming something that would've been totally plausible had it, you know, actually been the truth.”

“Okay so they're both critical people who are quick to judge. Elizabeth is as much guilty of it as Darcy is.”

Jane shook her head. “Mmm, I don't think so. Darcy's presumptions derive from his initial impression of her, which is that she's, quote, 'not handsome enough to tempt me', unquote. Elizabeth's presumptions derive from that very same interaction, not surprisingly.”

She hadn't even cracked open the book for that quote. *How much of this book does she have memorized?!*

“Hey he offered to dance with her the second time but she rejected him. The feeling seemed pretty mutual from the get-go. They just didn't understand each other at first.”

Jane was finding it difficult to compose herself. There was no topic that got her more fired up than critical literature analysis. Also this boy's ignorance was something to behold.

“No, Elizabeth understood him pretty well. Your character is determined by your actions, and his first action was to call her not handsome enough. That tells you all you need to know about the character of Mr. Darcy. He's a dick.” The adjective had fallen from her lips more harshly than she intended, but now was not the time to yield on any given discrepancy.

Mike was sweating by this point. He'd started smoothly with an apology and tanked quickly with an argument. This was not his week.

“Let's just agree to disagree and—”

“Agree to disagree?” Jane huffed. “Mike, I’ve read this book cover to cover more times than you can count on both hands. I don’t mean to sound all high and mighty, but I think you’re out of your depth.”

That one cut a bit deep.

“Look I know you really like this book but I just think you might have Darcy pinned wrong, he’s not a bad guy, he’s just...just...”

“Just what? Misunderstood? Misinterpreted? No, Mike, I think I’m interpreting him just right. I’ve read and re-read his dialogue more times than I can count, he’s still a d—”

“Just because you’ve read one book your whole life doesn’t make you an expert, okay? Maybe if you’d read *anything* else you wouldn’t be so uptight about it.”

The words tripped out of his throat and tumbled down the flight of stairs that was his mouth. They laid there broken on the landing where he couldn’t reach them, couldn’t fix them, couldn’t take them back. As soon as they’d fallen out, he wished he could.

“Wait, no, that’s not what I meant to s—”

“Finish the book, Mike.” She stood up and darted for the exit. “You’ll need it for practice.” And in a flash of *déjà vu*, she was gone.

Mike had little time to process all the new feelings he was feeling before his phone buzzed. A call was coming in, a call from Dustin. He wasn’t sure if the call was a welcomed distraction or an irritating nuisance, but he answered anyway.

“Hel—”

“Mike! Defcon 5! IT’S A DEFCON 5!”

The Party found themselves standing in the exact spot they’d been just a day before: Lucas’ driveway, right in front of his garage. Each of them had their own distinct look of horror and sorrow. Dustin and Lucas especially looked almost on the verge of tears, and Mike

wondered if he should put an arm around one of them or something.

"This cannot go unpunished," Lucas declared suddenly. He was shaking, his hands balled into fists, his eyes wild and berserk—he looked, for a moment, as if he had 'killed a man'.

"You're right," Will said, already dialing 9-1-1.

"No!" Lucas barked, pulling the phone from his ear. "No, this is personal. We're going to solve this ourselves, and we're going to make 'em hurt for doing this in the first place. No cops, no teachers, just unbridled revenge."

"How do we even know it's them?" Mike asked.

"Oh-ho!" Lucas cried, "Oh we know *damn well*. Billy and Steve have been behind every prank pulled on us since the 7th grade. But you know what? This isn't a prank, this is sabotage. They *knew* we were going to win that costume contest and get that prize and now they've sabotaged our plan so they can claim the prize for themselves. How many other people have suffered for the same reasons, hm? Well no more. This Halloween, we're winning that costume contest and we're gonna eat every last one of those delicious tater tots right in front of their *god DAMN FACES!*"

The driveway fell silent for a short moment. Lucas had stirred up something in all of them with his rousing words.

"God you're so hot when you get angry," Max murmured, thoroughly roused. "We'll figure this out later. I gotta borrow my boyfriend for a second." With no one to argue, Max grabbed Lucas by the hand and dragged him through the empty garage and inside his own house. The echo of the shutting door in the empty garage reminded the rest of them why they were there in the first place.

"This doesn't make any sense. How did they even know about the car in the first place?" Will thought out loud.

Dustin was noticeably wringing his hands. "I don't know, man, guess we'll never find out. But the real mystery is Where did they put it."

"At one of their house's?" Mike guessed.

Will shook his head. “They couldn't be that stupid, could they?”

“Even if they are, we can't just go snooping around either of their houses,” Dustin added.

Mike dropped his backpack and zipped it open. “Not unless we have an excuse.” From inside the pack he procured a colorful piece of paper with big, black lettering on one side.

Will took it and read it aloud: “Halloween Party, Steve's place, 28th, nine o'clock.”

Dustin slapped Mike's arm playfully. “Yes, Mike! Coming through with the save.”

Before Mike could humbly shrug off the comment, Will spoke up; “They'll kick us out the minute we show up. If Billy and Steve *did* steal the Ecto then I doubt they'll let us go anywhere near their place.”

“So it's a stealth mission,” Dustin said, seemingly more excited by the challenge, “It'll be just like a Tom Clancy video game—or, or! Assassin's Creed.”

“You know they'll beat our asses if they see us, right?” Mike opined, attempting his best efforts to cool his friend's fiery imagination.

But Dustin could not be contained. He'd thought of an idea and now he was latched onto it. And Mike and Will were along for the ride whether they consented or not.

“Come on, lads. Those two are gonna be a while so let's get to Mike's house to start planning Operation Tater Take Back.”

“Why do we have to go to my place?”

“Because your mom makes the best Krispy Squares, and I'm not staying up the entire night to plan this operation without a whole mess of krispy squares.”

“The entire night? We're already skipping class right now, we can't miss tomorrow morning, too.”

With a deep frown and a consoling set of doe eyes, Dustin gripped Mike's shoulder tightly. "Mike, buddy...yeaaaaaah we can." He clapped him on the shoulder, big grin back in full effect. "Now come on, you gotta call your mom on the way over so the krispy squares are waiting for us."

"Why don't you call them Rice Krispies like everyone else?"

"Because, Mike, I'm not trying to get sued! Now let's go."

Notes for the Chapter:

I bet I'll finish this story before I finish the actual book lmao

4. Lydia

Notes for the Chapter:

Im keeping the DEFCON mistake because as a dumb ass I can relate to Dustin

Mike, Will, Lucas, and Dustin looked like four drug dealers parked on the corner of the street trying to solicit new customers. For the most part it wasn't working, probably because it was nearing 1:00AM and they were in an Indianapolis suburb. But they definitely had the look. Slap on some comical masks and a few AR-15s and our boys would look just about ready to take down the Second National Bank.

They were on a mission. A reconnaissance mission. Dustin had brought along four pairs of binoculars so that they could, "Do it right." As if anything could go wrong in the middle of a metropolitan suburb. The worst thing they thought of happening was the police rolling up, a complaint that only seemed to be echoed by Lucas to the abashed confusion of his friends. Regardless, they were all a little shaken. Not by the thought of cops, no, but by the thought of Billy Hargrove catching them stalking his house in the middle of the night. That was a fate worse than jail.

Max wasn't with them for the obvious reason that she was sleeping in the very house they were sitting outside of. Billy Hargrove and Max Mayfield, by some divine miracle, were siblings. Step siblings. And while it was common knowledge that Max more than didn't care for her "brother," the boys doubted she'd understand their mission.

They had an in for Steve's house—the Halloween party. But Billy's house was a bit more challenging.

Dustin initially suggested just getting Max to do it for them. Max had protested that if the two seniors did in fact steal the Ecto, they obviously wouldn't leave it somewhere she could find it. Her brother was stupid, but he wasn't *that* stupid.

"Max brought up a really good point earlier," Will said. They'd been sitting in the car for an hour in relative silence, and some of them

were getting tired of this shit. "It's probably at Steve's, and we're going to be there tomorrow anyway. Why don't we just go home?"

Dustin replied in a huff. "*Because*, we at least have to check. We can't underestimate our enemies just because we have the high ground."

"But we're not exactly checking, are we?" Mike noted. "We'll have to get into the house to actually do that."

"He's right," Dustin said. "Lucas, get in there and find out what's what."

"Me? Why me?"

"Because you've been in there before, you know the layout better than any of us."

"No I haven't!"

Lucas' three best friends turned to stare at him.

"What are you talking about?" Dustin asked.

"I've never been inside Max's house before. She always says her family is crazy so we end up going to my place. Which I am more than fine with. Seeing her brother at school is enough for me, thanks."

The curly-haired boy next to him threw his head back and released a guttural groan. 90% of his plan for that night relied on Lucas knowing the ins and outs of the Mayfield household. Now he was going to have to improvise.

"Alright," he said, freshly composed, "I guess we're doing this the hard way."

"What're you the bad cop now?" Mike joked. He laughed lightly at his own joke for a few brief seconds, but was cut off quickly when Dustin held up an honest to God crowbar. All eyes turned to it while Dustin zipped up the duffle bag it had come from.

"What's the hard way?" Will was the first to ask.

“We're gonna take this,” Dustin explained, holding up the hefty tool, “and we're gonna break into their garage.”

It only took Mike a second to respond. “That's the dumbest idea you've ever had.”

“I thought that was the gumball?” Will contested.

Mike shook his head. “The world record gumball idea *was* pretty stupid. But breaking into Billy Hargrove's garage in the dead of night takes the cake for not only being really, *really* stupid, but also illegal.”

“Oh he's got you there, Dustin.”

Dustin swung around in his seat—crowbar in hand—to point it directly at his two biggest detractors. “Hey! You don't know how long I spent finding the parts for that car. Do you know how hard it is to get actual police sirens? Hard, okay? Don't even get me started on where I had to find a transmission for a car this old. We found the rear view mirror in a scrapyard in *Ohio*. Have you ever been to Ohio, Mike? No, you haven't, so let me paint you a picture: It sucks! I hate Ohio! But we needed that mirror, and now, we need this crowbar.”

“They probably have an alarm system,” Mike argued.

“Oh well!” Dustin shrugged indifferently. His eyes betrayed a story of desperation. “We *need* that car, Mike!”

Dustin was intransigent. That was his way; unyielding, uncompromising. Whether or not they actually needed the car to win the contest was a non-issue because this was about something else entirely. This was about Dustin seeing a project through until the end, no matter how he got to that end. And by the looks of it, the only thing stopping him was a very fragile window.

“Okay,” Mike muttered warily. “Okay, but,” he said to Lucas and Will, “but you two stay here.”

“What?” Lucas shook his head fiercely, “What? No, fuck you, this is personal, I have just as much a stake in this as Dustin does, I should be there too.”

“Yeah? Then who's gonna keep the car running when we need to make a quick getaway? Unless you're fine with Billy Hargrove taking out your headlights with a baseball bat right before he takes off your head!”

Lucas stared at his dashboard in deep contemplation. They'd all had enough run-ins with Billy Hargrove to know how serious Mike was.

“Yeah I'll keep the car running.”

“Thank you.”

Mike turned to Will, prepared for another argument, but his best friend was docile as ever. A quick thumbs up was all he needed to convey his happy complacency.

Dustin was still thumbing his crowbar when Mike gave him the signal. A shared nod of their heads and they were out onto the streets, out in the open. Autumn was still lagging behind Summer, but Mike was shivering. Shaking.

“Come on,” he whispered. Dustin's feet had planted firm the minute he stepped out of the car. Billy Hargrove's house was right across the street. A bungalow with an attached garage. In a neighborhood not dissimilar to the one in *Halloween*, a movie that Dustin remembered vividly in that particular moment.

“Hey!”

They jumped.

“Hey!” Lucas repeated, a bit louder this time. His head was sticking out the window. “If you see Max...I wasn't here.”

The scare had given Dustin renewed confidence. “Fuck off! Come on, Mike.”

“I already said th—”

“Come on!”

Dustin held the crowbar awkwardly in one hand. When that didn't feel right, he gripped it with both hands. Then just one again. Maybe two. Two hands. No, one. One? Okay two.

“Just break it!”

“I'm thinking, Mike!”

One hand. Definitely one hand.

“Do you want me to do it?”

“No, fuck off, I got this.”

Okay on three. One.

Two.

“Are those cameras?”

“Mike! Can you please—...Hey those are cameras.”

The two boys looked dead at each other. There was no sensor light behind the garage—pitch black. Even in the dead of night, Mike could see his friend's eyes flicker.

Without a second thought and with both hands wrapped tightly around his tool, Dustin destroyed the garage door window. The glass cracked and shattered loudly, the pieces falling like rain and splattering at their feet. It had taken less than a second. They both stared with gaping mouths and wide eyes at the outcome of their actions. Glass was everywhere.

The back porch light and the garage light flickered to life simultaneously. Neither boy was sure where to look and how to panic, so they ran. The crowbar was long forgotten on the ground while their feet pounded away at the soft grass, then the hard pavement, until finally they'd made it back to the car.

Lucas flicked his headlights on. “Did you see—”

“DRIVE DRIVE DRIVE”

Steve Harrington had good taste in music. Well, Steve Harrington had good taste in everything. Music, drinks, food, house, clothes, shoes, women...Men? Anyway, he had really good taste in music, which was the first thing that Max noted when she stepped through his front door. The next thing she noted was the odor: smoke, booze, sweat, sex, all the best ingredients of a truly Lit™ party (by Indianapolis' standards). The red-head couldn't be happier.

Lucas stepped forward. "Alright, boys, we're in, let's get to work."

Well, she could be a little happier.

"Okay so Dustin and I will check the garage. Mike and Will, you two check the backyard. We'll meet by the punch bowl in five minutes, got it?"

"What party has a punch bowl in 2018?"

"Not the time, Mike! Everybody break."

Before Max could get a word in edgewise, the four of them had taken off. In less than a few seconds they had disappeared in the pulsing crowd of bodies. Thankfully Max pre-gamed before meeting up with the boys, so she was quite content with mixing herself into the very same crowd and letting the music take her away.

In that crowd is where she ran into none other than the Host himself. Steve Harrington was dressed in the height of fashion and owning it like the bad bitch he was. He was having such a good time with two other girls that he didn't even notice Max bump into him. She did it a few more times.

"Hey?!" He spun around, nearly spilling his drink. "Oh hey! Mad Max, you wanna watch where you're going?"

Max laughed. Typically she didn't take shit from anyone, and that definitely constituted shit, but the pre-game had gone hard, and the music was going even harder, so she only laughed.

"You sound like you're having a good time!" Steve shouted over the

swelling music.

“You have a very nice home!” Max shouted back, dancing in step with Steve.

“Yeah my parents—”

“It must have a pretty big garage!”

Steve's eyes squared on her.

“Uh, yeah it—”

“You must be able to fit, like, two whole cars in there!”

Now he was getting suspicious.

“Is this what you usually do at parties? Harass the host with weird questions?”

“*Harass*? If you think that's harassment then you're lucky I'm drunk!”

It didn't make sense. And to an extent, it wasn't supposed to.

Mike closed the sliding door behind him. He relished the silence that the barrier afforded him. Parties were never his scene—he loathed them. But he'd never tell the Party that. They loved their social gatherings, especially Max. She always got giddy at the prospect of going out with people, any people, anywhere, anytime. None of them really understood it. They always assumed it was just a girl thing.

Not Mike though. But we already knew that. Everybody knew that. Michael Wheeler is not a going out boy.

The sky was speckled with with stars. The moon was full, shining a giant spotlight on the backyard. Mike stood at the edge of the porch, leaning over the railing, studying the scopic yard. It went on for several dozen yards before stopping at the edge of a forest. There was a small shed tucked away in the far right corner, nestled next to the trees. Too small for a car, Mike thought.

"I'm gonna walk around the house, see what there is to see," Will said.

Mike nodded. "I'm gonna go back inside and ask around. Maybe someone's seen it."

With a final nod, they both went their separate ways. Will fled down the porch stairs and disappeared into the night.

The backdoor slid open. Mike didn't notice; he was watching the sky. Travis Scott's *Stargazing* was murmuring softly in the background.

Jane approached the tall boy quietly. He was lost in the stars.

Mike jumped a bit when she whispered, "They're beautiful."

"JesusfuckingchristdidntanyoneeverteachyounotTOSNEAKUPONSOMEBODY"

She laughed a little; it was still getting to him.

"Oh I'm sorry, I thought I was speaking to a *man*."

Mike huffed. "That's very 1984 of you to say."

This time she snorted. "Saying things are very 1984 is very 1983 of you."

She stumbled towards him, letting the railing catching her just in time. Her hand was clutching a red solo cup for dear life.

"What is Michael Wheeler doing at a high school party, anyway?"

Mike nearly choked on his next words. The decision to tell the truth was a hard one.

"I—We're, just trying to relax. Doesn't everyone go to these parties?"

"Everyone but you."

He turned his head slightly. She was standing beside him, but she was looking up. He wished, if only for a second, to know what she was thinking.

Stargazing was just ending.

"We're looking for a car. We think Billy and Steve stole it," he admitted softly.

"The Ecto."

Mike's head nearly spun. "Yeah! Yeah, how'd you know?"

"Obviously I've seen *Ghostbusters*, it's a cultural phen—"

"No! Fuck, you know what I mean. Have you seen it? Do you know where it is?"

Jane looked like she was thinking reluctantly. She sipped her drink thoughtfully, eyes never leaving the sky. He waited in agonizing silence for several seconds.

"Maybe," was all she said.

Mike's head did spin this time.

"Maybe?! Either you do or you don't! Which is it?"

Jane cradled her pounding head. "Stop yelling at me. I'm very drunk, my memory's a little hazy."

"I—" Mike clenched his fists. His lip was nearly bleeding from how hard he was biting it. "Jane," he began again in a much calmer tone, "Can you please try and remember where you saw the Ecto? Please."

She pondered silently. Her eyes were low to the ground, shifting here and there in intense thought. Her forehead creased into wavy lines and Mike found himself lost in them.

"Did you know that Jane Austen got married once?"

The Paladin nearly screamed.

"No," he said surprisingly softly, "I didn't."

"It's funny actually. It was one of her friend's brothers, who was much younger than her at the time, I think. And he was so dull and

uninteresting, but Jane was thinking about her family, so when he proposed out of the blue she said...yes.” She laughed and shook her head. “Overnight she got second thoughts and the next morning she called the whole thing off. No one was really surprised.”

Mike listened carefully. He didn't see the meaning in the story, but he wanted to. This time, for once.

Her eyes flicked up again. “It makes you think, doesn't it? About the people you look up to. Because they're always human. Always.”

What was she looking at? Mike wanted to know. He wanted to know exactly which star she had her eyes on. Whatever lucky fucking star.

“I don't really look up to anybody.” He murmured with a certain hollowness to his already distant voice.

“No?” She chuckled. “Where does Mike Wheeler get his values from, then? Does Mike Wheeler even have values?”

Mike willed his mouth shut. *Think first!* he screeched in his head.

“I don't know, Jane. Maybe it's the Party. Lucas never hesitates to teach me a lesson in morality whenever he gets the chance. I guess that's why he's lawful good and I'm... But, I don't know, maybe I've actually been listening this whole time.”

They both heard the backdoor slide open, but before either of them even looked to see who it was, Jane spoke up, “We're busy, Troy.” The door closed shut quickly after.

Mike gulped. “So...the Ecto?”

“Oh!” She chirped. “Right. Right, of course. I'd be happy to show you where your special car is.”

“You can just point—”

“No! No no no no, I'll show you. You'd never find it without me.” She finished with a knowing smirk.

“Try me, Hopper.”

Jane blinked. An unexpected response. A surprise, to be sure, but a welcome one. With one last swig to finish off her drink, she tossed the plastic cup over the railing.

“You'll find your car right over there.”

Mike followed the curve of her outstretched hand. Her thin finger was pointing outward, past the railing, straight into the woods. He couldn't see any farther than ten yards past the treeline, it was too dark.

“I don't see it.”

“Yeah, I told you, I'd be happy to show you where it is.”

That was how Mike found himself walking through an unnamed brush with the least likely person he could have expected. Plain Jane Hopper was practically skipping beside him while they made their way through the dense woods. Magically she'd recovered another fresh drink before they set off, and she was nursing it carefully. Every now and then Mike would catch her stumbling ahead, trying her best not to trip.

“How deep are you?” he asked out of the blue. She cocked her head curiously.

“Deep?”

He nodded his head at the red cup in her hand.

“Oh, hmm,” she hummed. “Do you drink, Mike?”

“Not often, no.”

“Oh so you wouldn't know, then. There's a fine line, you know, the tipping point. I have to keep myself just below the line. If I stay below the line, then I get to be drunk without blacking out. Just have to stay below the line.”

“Sounds like you have it down to a science.”

She laughed. "I never understood science. You understood it, though. I remember listening to you answer questions in chemistry. It sounded like you knew more than Kravitz did sometimes."

"Science just makes sense. Not like people."

"Oh, god, Mike, don't be so cliché. People make sense when you actually talk to them. Take me, for example; aren't I making a lot more sense now that you're actually talking to me?"

Mike held his tongue. He was getting pretty good at it.

"Are we getting close to the—"

"In any case!" Jane slurred, "It's always better to talk." She tipped the solo cup back and emptied it.

"As opposed to?"

"Hmm?"

"As opposed to..." Mike repeated slowly. "It's always better to talk instead of..."

"Oh! Well." Jane stopped in her tracks.

Mike stopped too. He watched as she lurched forward, wobbling on shaky feet until she was standing right in front of him.

"Instead of this." She shoved him. Or, she tried to. Her hand shot out and hit Mike's chest limply; he barely felt it through his sweater. The force itself acted more on Jane, nudging her back until she was almost falling. Somehow, she didn't.

"How do you do that?"

"Hm?"

"That. The balance. I don't think I've ever actually seen you fall, or trip, or anything. Which is strange for a cheerleader, I think. It's strange for anyone, having a sense of balance that crazy."

“You know Mike if I didn't know any better, I'd think you were complimenting me.”

Sweater boy didn't have an answer for that one. He picked at his baby-blue sleeve, trying not to think about anything in particular.

Thankfully he was saved by the bell, ringing from his phone.

“Will?”

“Mike! Max found the car, crazy story. Where are you? We're all meeting out front before we head out. Are you coming?”

Mike glanced at the definitely-drunk-past-her-tipping-point teenager in front of him. The chocolate brown doe-eyes weren't looking so sweet in this light.

“You guys head out, I'll catch up with you at Lucas'.”

The two boys said their goodbyes and Mike hung up. The entire time his eyes were dead set on her. The ghost of a smirk once playing on his lips was gone, replaced by a deep frown.

“You said you knew where the car is.”

Jane looked past him with a flat expression. “I...lied?”

A bomb went off in the back of Mike's head. He could feel the red-hot heat lighting up his cheeks, inflaming his frustration. There was nothing he could think to do but stitch his lips and start walking back to the house. He knew that if he stayed things would only get worse. He was tired of things getting worse. He was done with this, he was done with her, he was done with everything everyone had dragged him along for. Mike was going home to sit on his laptop and forget any of this had ever happened.

But something wasn't letting him. It was a hand, latched securely onto his sleeve.

“Wait I'm sorry—”

“I don't care—”

“Just let me—”

“Let go of me!”

The hand unlatched. Jane stumbled back. She wasn't holding a cup anymore; she was holding herself.

“I'm sorry, Mike, I don't know why, I—I don't know, I just—”

“Just wasted my time? Because that's what you did, Jane. That's all you've been doing, this entire god damn week! Wasting my time and making me think it was my fault. I tried to be nice and this is what I got. Well I'm tired, okay? I'm tired of trying. So I'm going home.”

After a final heavy sigh, Mike picked up his feet. He could hear the small girl sobbing behind him. Pleading him to stay and hear her out. Drunken ramblings fluttering loosely in the open October air. He did his damndest to ignore it while he walked.

He'd made it not ten steps before something did finally stop him. Two words spoken with enough intensity that Mike's own curiosity held him back and turned his head.

“Mike, stop.”

She was standing there. The unabated moonlight cast shadows across her pale face. It twinkled in her eyes, shading them a deep silver. Her red frilly dress danced in the sudden winds, gentle breezes just a second ago. Mike could feel the wind pushing him, like a hand guiding him towards her.

But Mike's curiosity was wavering. Common sense was setting in.

He turned his back to her and pressed forward. No amount of haunted Halloween BS was going to keep him in those woods. The more he thought about it, the more he understood the trap he'd almost walked into. I mean, a pretty girl leading her victim into the spooky woods just before Halloween? This had Hargrove and Harrington written all over it. They were probably waiting behind the trees to jump out and make Mike piss his pants. But Mike got the better of them this time. The party had found the car, and Mike had avoided a dumb Halloween prank.

Things were looking up for Mike Wheeler.

Like, literally.

Like he was looking up because he was falling backwards.

No, not falling. He was being pulled.

No. Pushed. He was being pushed backwards onto his ass.

But there was no one in front of him. Only someone behind him.

"I told you to stop."

Notes for the Chapter:

hey if you wanna tell me waht the fuck im doing that
would be gr8 cheers

Author's Note:

yall know i posted today for a reason. yall know i
wanted that time stamp